Mongolian Wrestling (Bukh) and Ethnicity

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[Received May 16, 2005 ; Accepted November 28, 2005]

Bukh is a Mongolian traditional sport, in which the wrestler’s body represents a beast and a bird of prey, namely supernatural strength. This is recognized as a numinous embodiment or spiritual possession. In the meantime, the incarnation rite of Bukh also functions as that of the community of Nutag. The symbolism of Bukh, in this meaning, is realized in two ritual spaces, the Ovoo festival whose cultural background lies in Nutag and Naadam which is performed as a ceremony. Moreover, the combination between Ovoo and Naadam festivals and Bukh serves a function as a mechanism to sustain collective memories and identity, perpetuating the identity of the Mongolians.

Keywords: Bukh, Ovoo festival, Naadam Summer festival, Nutag

1. Introduction

Bukh is one of the Mongolian traditional martial arts the people are very proud of. However, because of the wide geographical area over which the population is spread, Bukh has some variations depending on areas. Among those variations performed in the present day, two mainstreams are Khalkh bukh in Mongolia and Ujumchin bukh in Shilingol Aimag, in Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China. Though there are differences between the two in their costumes, rules, performing styles and procedures, many similarities in ritualistic factors can be observed.

In Mongolia, Khalkh bukh is a national sport, assuming an imperative role in their national ceremonies. Meanwhile, because Inner Mongolia is one of the administrative regions of the People’s Republic of China, which is a multiracial society, Ujumchin bukh is recognized as a traditional culture of Mongolians as a minority tribe. In other words, the former is a central sport in the Mongolian nation, and the latter is a peripheral sport performed in one of the local areas of China. However, as the symbol of their own culture, both of them are deeply related to Mongolian’s spiritual world, functioning in order to strengthen the ethnic bondage (Hereafter the word ‘Bukh’ is used as a generic term for those two versions of Bukh). This is the case especially in Ujumchin bukh. Since Mongolian people, who only comprise 13 % of the total population in Inner Mongolia, have started agriculture and settled in one place resulting in the policy of grazing allocation by the government, their culture is being assimilated into that of the Han tribe. Additionally, their manipulative self-identification is going on through marital relations with Han tribe. The number of Mongolian people who do not speak their mother tongue is increasing especially in urban areas. Under these circumstances, it is underlining that Ujumchin bukh is deeply involving in recognition of Mongolian ethnicity, vitalization and enhancement. According to a recent report, in Inner Mongolia, unmarried wrestlers are regarded as ideal marriage partners-to-be for young girls, and 60 % of the board members of Sum (village) in livestock farming areas are former wrestlers (Liu 1995). These examples prove the social role of Ujumchin bukh and the social status of the wrestlers. The purpose of this paper is,

1 Aimag is a Mongolian administrative division equivalent to a prefecture of Japan but inner Mongolia is lower in status than a Chinese province which is the equivalent of a prefecture.
by analyzing the specific symbolism of ‘Bukh’ which has been nurtured in the cultural tradition, to study how Mongolian’s ethnicity has been materialized and strengthened in the relations between Bukh and the ritual space. First, to clarify the issue, the symbolism of Bukh will be explained in the following section.

2. Symbolism of Bukh

The symbolism of Bukh is concentrated in a wrestler’s bodily expressions that are called develt or devee. Develt are ‘dances performed by wrestlers’ before and after the wrestling match. Wrestlers imitate the movements of beasts and birds of prey in dance. The typical develt in Khalkh bukh is the dance of the falcon. In its basic performances it is said that the movements of wrestler’s hands are imagined as a falcon, and his chest as a lion (Erdeni, G. 1992:20). In short, this is a style in which a beast and a bird of prey are united. This united style is frequently observed in a series of performance from the wrestler’s entrance to exit. For example, at the end of the develt performed by a wrestler after entering, he imitates a falcon’s landing on the ground with its wings flapping, at the same time a bull-camel in estrus is depicted by the wrestler’s body. Another example is the wrestler’s posture before the match imitating a horniece stud bull. The bodily expressions seen in the unison of a beast and a falcon can be called ‘intra-temporal integration’ (Figure 1). In the case of Khalkh bukh, the denomination of a beast and a bird of prey are utilized for the wrestlers’ titles. In Ujumchin bukh, though the main movements are those of beasts and strong animals, the wrestler’s performances change from one beast to another, and end up integrating one into the other. An instance is shown in the performance where a wrestler enters trotting, and them jumps with his hands and legs alternately up and down. The trotting is called ‘Buurin shogshoo’ or bull-camel’s trotting, and the jump is ‘Arslangin choilolt’ or lion’s jump. Another example is presented in Barga bukh in the northeast area of Inner Mongolia. The wrester here performs develt that changes from ‘deer’s jump’ to ‘stud’s jump’. These bodily expressions of wrestlers can be called ‘diachronic integration’ (Figure 2).

As mentioned above, the wrestlers represent not only beasts and birds of prey but also breeding stock such as stallions and camels that are sent out to graze as part of everyday-life along with other domestic livestock. This indicates the relationship with nomadic culture. The nomadic people are

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3 In present Mongolia, the following titles are given to the wrestlers according to achievements in the tournament match held in the national Naadam numbering 512 participants; Nachin (meaning a falcon) is awarded to a wrestler who beats five opponents in a row (The 16th rank or higher). Khartsaga (a big falcon) to a wrestler who beats six (the 8th or higher). Zaan (elephant) to a wrestler who beats seven (the 4th or higher). Garid (a huge bird in a legend) to a wrestler who beats eight (final match). Arslan (a lion) is a rank for champion. Additionally, Avarga (a giant) is given to a wrestler who becomes champion two times. Every time an Avarga becomes champion, an additional rank is given to him and Darkhan Avarga (saint Avarga) is the highest title given to a wrestler who becomes champion five times.
owed of the fierceness and destructive capability of beasts and birds of prey, but also worship the fearless breeding stock protecting livestock as an energy source for people from natural enemies such as wolves and the domestic livestock as an energy source for people. Those spiritual practices of a nomadic race are materialized through the wrestlers’ bodies in Bukh. In the Mongolian races, certain animals are regarded ancestors in legends, and a beast or an animal in breeding stock is related to the guardian spirits protecting sacred mountains and rivers. Those animals are considered to have social and cultural significances in the life of nomadic races. The common point seen in the variations of Bukh is that the wrestler’s bodily expressions symbolize ‘strength’, especially ‘superhuman force’. Obviously, the wrestler’s superhuman strength is shown in other ritual behaviors as well as his bodily expressions. Taking Khalkh bukh as an example, at the occasion when two wrestlers enter the arena to hold the playoff, the Zasuul or referees, of both sides fall down, expressing the eminent strength of both wrestlers. Similarly, people believe that eating Idee (foods prepared beforehand such as dairy products and candies) scattered around by the wrestler who has won the tournament, and rubbing his sweat on the skin have magical effects for good luck and physical fitness.

Jangaa (silk strands colored in different colors except for black), which the strong wrestler in Ujumchin bukh wears around his neck, partakes the symbolism in common with the rite of shamanism observed in the Ovoo festival, which worships the god of the universe. In the festival, silk ribbons colored red, green, blue, yellow and white decorated around the neck of a domestic animal sacrificed to the god in order to identify the animal as a sacred one. Similarly, Jangaa signifies the wrestler as sacred, because he is generally recognized as the symbol of the life in the community, Nutag. At the time of a wrestler’s retirement, he hands over his Jangaa to a young, promising wrestler in the community. This is an incarnation rite to strengthen the vital energy of the weakened land. The incarnation rites of Bukh are concentrated into a legend that ‘After the strong wrestler has passed away, a wolf makes a nest in his chest and procreates there’ and into a cultural behavior that ‘one steals the dead body of a strong wrestler’.

In this way, it may be understood that the symbolism of Bukh is closely related to the view of the universe in the ancient shamanism and the form of the nomadic life, and deeply involved in the spiritual world of Mongolians. In the rites performed in the Altaic races, a shaman appears in various shapes of animals. Among those animals, ‘bulls, mail horses, bears, deer and eagles’ are regarded as the strongest (Uno, 1989). The performances seen in Develt of Bukh are inferred to have some kind of relation with those animals.

3. The space where Bukh is performed

3.1. Bukh in Ovoo festival

An ovoo is a mound built in the places people think as sacred, such as the top of the mountain, a site beside the lake or in the precinct or back of temples. The Ovoo festival, since the Han Period, has been held twice a year as a seasonal festival in spring, or the resurrection period, and in autumn, or the declining period, in the nomadic production cycle. The twice annual festivals represent the borders in time. In the present time, the Ovoo festival is held once a year in the season between the late spring and the early summer, and it can be said that the Naadam festival has taken over the autumn festival. Originally, an ovoo was the sacred place where the god descended and lived, and where the nomadic people offered sacrifices such as horses and sheep, praying for the happiness of the community, reproduction of breeding stock and the perfect state of their health (Goto 1956). Though the god basically means the god of the heaven and earth, it is actually acknowledged as a deity (nutgin sahiulsan) of a specific area. In the nomadic areas,
each nomadic group (Nutag) basically has a different god of heaven and earth with the characteristics of a tutelary deity for the group (Goto 1956: 62-63). Nutag means ‘pasture as a foothold of one social group’. ‘Ovoo, as the god in Nutag, becomes the tutelary deity in the course of time, and symbolizes the interconnection between the group and Nutag. (Text partly omitted.) The relation between economic occupation and exploitation is assured here by wearing the outfit of religion and magic (Goto 1970: 207-208).’ A community, such as Aimag, Khoshuu (county) and Sum (village), or a family owns ovoos. Each owner performs the ceremony for its Ovoo. Usually ovoos in an odd number are prepared. One independent ovoo is arranged in one case, and a group of 13 ovoos are seen in another. The most common arrangement of ovoos is that one big ovoo is placed in the center and ovoos of the same number in east and west of the big ovoo. In the case of a group of ovoos, the central ovoo is regarded as the main god, or the core god of the land. It contains the cosmological meaning integrated into the god of luxuriance in respect and awe (Goto 1956). It is considered to be a symbol of connections of the group members sharing the same land (Nutag).

On the day of the Ovoo festival, a lama intones the Ovoo Sutra, and performs the ceremony, offering sacrifice and bowing to the god. After that, common nomadic people come and pray. They offer boiled sheep meat, alcoholic beverage and dairy products in front of the main ovoo, pray to the god of the heaven and earth, and bow (or genuflect). As the place is the sacred ritual space, uncleanness is considered taboo and women and people in mourning are not allowed to visit and pray there. After the ceremonies finish, games such as Bukh and horse-racing are dedicated in the flat place away from the ovoos, The feast is held and the meat of the sacrificed animal is offered. Women are allowed to participate there. While the ceremonies involving the sutra, sacrifice and bowing are conducted in a solemn and revered space, competitive sports are performed in an extensive place exclusive from the sacred space.

In other words, the space for Bukh is located on the border between sacred and secular spaces.

The participants in the Ovoo festival are members of the community that owns the ovoos in principle, though the festival is not at all exclusive toward the external groups. However, in the contest of Bukh, the wrestler within the community should be a winner, and therefore the wrestlers of the external group give in without fighting in most cases. The reason is that Ovoo festival is the common ceremony for the people sharing the life in Nutag. The participants pray for their god of the land by dedicating Bukh while wishing for the prosperity of the community. Namio Egami provides that Ovoo festival has similar characteristics to the annual festivals of north and central Asian tribes, and maintains that wrestling and horse races held there are not merely an exhibition or a game, and that participants in the competitions must have been regarded as an actual deity itself or its spiritual possession (Egami 1951). In this way, the perception that the wrestler in the time and space of Ovoo festival is the entity with godhood continues to the present time. Even until the middle of the 20th century, remains of prominent wrestlers were enshrined in the main building of the temple. The custom in which people had stolen and buried the dead body of a famous wrestler in the ground of their community wishing that a gifted wrestler would be born in their own community has been observed in various regions until recent years. These examples prove that the wrestlers were religious objects.

As shown previously, the fact that the wrestler of the community is promised to win in the match saves face of the community brings the sense of unity visually and physically and strengthens the sense of belonging further. Focusing on the combination between ethnicity and certain territory (or the native land), Anthony pointed out that this combination enables the sustainability of the collective memories and identity in the community (Anthony 2001: 29-36). Indeed, the concept of Nutag experienced through the Ovoo festival is the homeland and nomadic community that nomadic people constantly attach themselves to and feel nostalgia for. Whenever a Mongolian meets someone somewhere, he or she tells what Nutag he or she comes from or asks the

6 The word Notuuk derives from ‘Udagan, Idogen’ in the Altaic language, meaning ‘the goddess of the land’ and ‘priestess’ (Gongor, D. 1991: 473-478). In addition, Mongolian nomadic people have a custom to affectionately call the god of the land ‘Ovgon’ (meaning Grandfather).
other party’s Nutag. In the case he or she comes from the same Nutag as the other party’s, he or she feels a sense of closeness with the other, and what is more, the relationship of mutual trust is easy to be built between them. In this meaning, Nutag continues to create the separation and integration of identity all the time. The wrestler is a symbol of the community, or Nutag, and at the same time, by invoking the spirits in the Ovoo festival, he can be said to be a mark of the people’s collective memories and identity. Since the function of the people’s basic collective identity is decisively concerned with an individual sense of belonging and self-respect (N. Grazer 1984), Bukh is high in the social significance. A community with the right to hold ceremonies of the Ovoo festival, larger or smaller in its size, stands in the same rank in the cultural structure among communities. The social identity of end communities is absorbed into that of upper communities, and integrated further into that of the larger social community. Meanwhile, the Ovoo festival, indicating the border of time and space, incorporates the life rhythm of nomadic people. Moreover, the festival is a social process forming an ‘innate identity’ of the community members because of its recurrence and tradition. In this way, the connection between economic exploitation and religion in the Ovoo festival and the community, including symbolism of Bukh, may lead to the social, cultural backgrounds in which Bukh is able to be a root of Mongolian ethnicity.

3.2. Bukh in Naadam festival

Naadam means ‘a play and a game’. In the Naadam festival, Bukh, horse-racing and archery are said to be the ‘three competitions for men’. Although these three are the main contests, other competitions such as Mongolian chess, a tug of war and folk entertainments are also exhibited. Since long ago the ‘three competitions for men’ have been held, individually in some cases, as dedication to the Ovoo festival and as military training. After the Mongol Empire was established in the 13th century, they became the national ceremony. In Mongolia, at the time when ‘Danshig / Naadam’ was dedicated with wishing for long life of the first guru known as a religious leader in 1630’s, it was instituted as a national religious festival. Since the festival was splendidly held as the cerebration commemorating the victory in the people’s revolution in the former Mongolia in 1924, the festival has been a means to enhance nationalism. In the meantime, in Inner Mongolia, the festival has been a decorative exhibition to demonstrate the political power of rulers’ since the Qing dynasty. After the Inner Mongolia autonomous region was established, the Communist Party of China has supported the festival, regarding it as a good chance to promote its own political agenda. Additionally, it serves not only as the biggest opportunity to consume materials from an economic point of view but also as a supreme entertainment, the festival has been occasionally held nation-wide.

As mentioned above, it can be said that the ‘three competitions for men’ have changed from the dedication in the Ovoo festival to the Naadam festival as entertainment. Unlike the non-secular Ovoo festival, the Naadam festival is a festive, entertaining event in the secular space. While the Ovoo festival is voluntarily held by a community the Naadam festival is implemented by an individual administrative body in the unit of the administration in many cases. The present provincial system is essentially based on the territories of rulers’ in the 13th century and the khoshuu system organized in the Qing dynasty. Therefore, these administrative divisions are considered to be the foundation of social identity, and have the meaning of the community group as a collective Nutags. Accordingly, in the Naadam festival, a wrestler as an individual tends to be impersonalized as the representative of his community in terms of sense and behaviors. The bigger the scacc of the Naadam festival is, the more strongly his impersonalized collective norm is enhanced. This is illustrated in a saying, ‘one losing wrestler means one losing community’. In the Ujumchin area, without proficiency of a full-fledged wrestler, young wrestlers are not allowed to

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7 While identity in tradition is being lost because of globalization, new identity is constantly being formed by sharing a series of experiences of each generation or of own. This idea is certainly generalized today. However, in a traditional society where traditionalism is still preserved, its shared historic memories are deeply involved in the primary matters of the race or of the traditional society. The fact that it is innately shared with the members of the community especially through the dissemination of the ritual culture. The sense of community in the homogeneous Mongolian nomadic society is built on the experiences and sequences of such innate identity.
participate in the matches held in other communities. Therefore, the space of the Naadam festival has significance as the ‘site’ where the collective identity acquired in the Ovoo festival is realized.

The case of the Naadam festival in S Aimag of Inner Mongolia will be taken as an instance here. The Naadam festival held by S Aimag in 1982 was one of the biggest festivals. In the wrestling match, 1024 wrestlers participated. They came from counties within S Aimag as well as other Aimags, including non-Mongolian tribes. As a matter of fact, this was a nation-wide tournament in Inner Mongolia. Among the wrestlers was a strong contestant of Han Chinese origin, named G, who was a national champion in Judo and wrestling matches at that time. Actually, since he had been a runner-up of the Bukh contest commemorating the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Inner Mongolia, he was a threatening wrestler for others.

Unlike the Ovoo festival, in Naadam, the wrestler from any certain community is not promised to be a winner. In Inner Mongolia where the victory of the community is the highest honor for the members of the community in any circumstances, the victory of the wrestler from other tribes is considered an extraordinary disgrace. Therefore, in order to save face for their ethnicity, a spontaneous collaborative relationship was established between the wrestlers from S Aimag, the organizer of the festival, and the contestants from other Aimags. They collaboratively took a countermeasure against G. However, from the moment G was defeated in the fourth match, their collaboration ended and changed into a sense of rivalry. Eventually, a wrestler from another Aimag claimed victory, resulting in the dubious honor for S Aimag.

The case mentioned above indicates that two kinds of characteristically different rivalries can be observed in one Naadam festival. One is the rivalry among the tribes, ‘the wrestlers from Mongolian tribe vs. the one from Han tribe’. This is described to be a heterogeneous rivalry here. Being exposed to external stimuli, namely ‘others’ (other ethnic group), attributive identity was activated. The tribal identity in the lower level was enlarged to the ethnic one on a higher level. Another is ‘the local wrestlers vs. wrestlers from other areas’. A term, homogeneous rivalry, should be attributed to it. According to the case above, due to the dissolution of heterogeneous rivalry, the homogeneous one elicited. Accordingly, it became necessary to identify themselves in their own communities and to keep their dignity. Their identity was therefore reduced from that of common ethnicity to that of a local group. Thus because of the competitive sense produced by Bukh in the Naadam festival, ethnicity and its reactions were evoked, and ethnicity was activated. The other parties may focus only on ‘strength’ and ‘skill’ exhibited by the wrestlers in the site of Naadam festival. However, the fact that more important ethnicity in the background of those physical competition is functioning should be noted. The preceding Figure 3 is the model of this fact;

4. Conclusion

Previous sections illustrate the critical mechanism of Bukh: Through Bukh, critical mechanism of Bukh was demonstrated. Through Bukh, Mongolians learn, confirm and strengthen their
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collective identity and ethnicity in the space of the Ovoo and Naadam festivals. From the viewpoint of anthropology, Bukh is functioning as an ethnical marker similar to ‘expressive culture’ such as dance, music and religion. As shown in the case of Naadam in Inner Mongolia, confrontation with other ethnic and regional groups produced the effect of integration into a higher level. This is because the cultural property of Bukh played a role as a device maintaining identity. ‘Indeed, the more divergent cultural relations or unique cultural properties are, the stronger the sense of detachment of ethnicity is enhanced. This brings the increased possibility to sustain ethnicity. (Anthony 2001: 35)’ The Mongolian ethnicity realized through Bukh, with the background of the nomadic community or Nutag, is constantly maintained by the mechanism sustaining their collective memories and ethnicity named as Ovoo and Naadam festivals. In another aspect, due to the influence of socialism in which religions are suppressed, religious belief is decaying among the majority of the population in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia. In this way, the of strengthening the sense of unity would be found more in Bukh than in religion. Mongolians consistently say that ‘Without meat and Bukh, riots will be brought about.’ The saying illustrates the fact that Bukh is a psychological food similar to meat and indispensable for everyday life of Mongolians. Bukh is surely the mark of Mongolians’ ethnicity.

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International Journal of Sport and Health Science Vol.4, 103-109, 2006